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THE REACTION IN THE STUDY OF ENGLISH

PERHAPS no department in American schools has passed through more throes of experiment in the last decade than that of English. In consequence of the revival of interest in the study of English the market is flooded with new books ; instructors, everywhere, with more enthusiasm than wisdom, have been making trial of this and that new idea, too often with unsatisfactory results. That the mother tongue can be learned by studying most any subject other than English ; that it is a corollary of the sciences, mathematics, and the dead languages ; that the reading of good books insures the power of writing good English ; that English is to be wooed Petruchio-like, by abuse ; that the pupil's native speech should be allowed to grow without restraint or training till he can comprehend its grammatical abstractions, in short, till his habits of thought and expression are actually formed—these and many other notions as absurd have arisen, sometimes from misinterpreting principles established by eminent educators and sometimes from only partially apprehending them. But the inevitable reaction has already set in. The most we have gained is a lively appreciation of our weakness, the first and longest step of actual progress.

In teaching English grammar we have looked hard for some royal road only to get tangled in the byways and return at last to the old well-trodden path. Common sense compels us to say that grammar is a very important subject and that the only way to know it is to learn it. It lies at the very basis of the language as a science ; it fathers the habit of scholarly thought, the power of analysis ; it emancipates the mind from the caprice of circumstances. Familiarity with the parts of speech, phrases, clauses, and grammatical relations, is absolutely necessary to progress in composition and to the understanding of useful

criticism. Rhetoric, and by rhetoric I mean hardly more than systematic training in composition, is an absurdity without it. Furthermore a technical knowledge of English grammar, logically and naturally, comes before the study of all foreign tongues when these must be acquired by the analytic and not by the natural method. The evil of presupposing in the pupil a natural analytical knowledge of the principles of grammar is so prevalent that we find mere children struggling with the intricacies of Latin and French modes and tenses before they have begun to learn the meaning of mode and tense as applied to the mother tongue. I am convinced that the fundamental principles of analysis can be taught at the age of thirteen quite as readily as and far more profitably than at any subsequent time. In the Report of the Committee of Ten the committee on Latin advises that their subject be commenced in a four years' course not later than at the age of fourteen. The committee on foreign languages believes that French or German should be offered as an elective in the grammar school. This recommendation, however, they take pains to qualify. They have in view foundation building in language work. A modern language should be studied in the grammar school only when competent teachers can be secured, and then only in its simplest form, to help the pupil understand the structure of the English sentence and to assure facility in pronunciation. We note especially that they do not recommend the study of a modern language contemporary with the study of Latin or Greek at the beginning of a high-school course.

Here again we find ourselves reiterating the maxims of the greatest educators for the last four centuries: "everything in one's own language first;" "concentration of effort and unity of idea, one thing at a time;" "everything after the order of nature." Bacon, Melancthon, Luther, Ratich, Rousseau, Basedow, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Spencer, and hundreds of others, as experienced and more successful, if less famous, have reaffirmed these principles in one form or another and ostensibly they lie at the foundation of modern instruction. But the number of

intelligent educators today whose souls are wed to the wraith of a humanistic system dead two centuries ago is not inconsiderable. They refuse to believe that it is easier and more profitable for the child to study what is before him, an object of his daily observation and experience, than to search among the barren forms and dull symbols of a dead language for what is not worth the having after it is once obtained, or what can be obtained otherwise for one-tenth the time and trouble.

That English is set aside for subjects of less practical importance arises not alone from the spirit of conservatism; it is a natural result of the present crowded state of the curriculum. Matthew Arnold was speaking of a growing evil when he said of the English schools: "For myself I lament nothing more in our actual instruction than its multiformity—a multiformity too often of false direction and useless labor—nothing is taught well except what is known familiarly and taught often. The Greeks used to say: *Δις ἢ τρίς τὰ καλά*—*give us a fine thing two or three times over*—and they were right." The new learning of this century is hydra-headed. Physics, chemistry, zoölogy, geology, physiology, botany, political economy, mental philosophy, civil government, manual training—all these and many other subjects have asked and received recognition from the common school up. They claim attention on the grounds of philosophy and common sense. They best equip man for the struggle of life; they teach him to comprehend his environment; they make him a citizen of his age. They have fought their way into the curriculum and they are there to stay. Educators, however, while admitting them, reluctantly enough oftentimes, have striven to keep the old branches in the front ranks and the consequence is evident. Multiplicity of studies prevents harmony and coördination of subjects and contributes to the isolation and mutual jealousy of departments. Concentration of effort on the pupil's part is next to impossible; confusion begets absolute indifference. The memory is overburdened. No one subject is pursued effectively, for thoroughness necessarily implies an impractical expenditure of time; cramming, the very

worst form of mental dissipation, is the course too often adopted by ambitious teachers or forced upon them by the requirements of superior schools.

The effect of an intricate curriculum upon English is to drive it from the mind of the pupil and too often from the careful consideration of the teaching staff. Teachers like to have good papers, but ordinarily they are so concerned with the subject-matter that, so long as the papers evince a passable knowledge of their respective subjects, they are indifferent as to the character of the language in which they are couched. Every week papers on all sorts of themes, and written exercises without number, are prepared by the pupil. He absolutely cannot write them all with care; necessity compels him to hurry them in order to escape the penalty of non-preparation. By this he acquires a momentum of doing things. What he knew he has always expressed rapidly and superficially, and when he would elaborate he has all the force of habit to overcome. To search patiently for new facts, to systematize his own thoughts, to take infinite pains in expressing them—this is entirely foreign to his methods of mental activity. He has seen much but assimilated little; his knowledge is on the surface; his powers of invention are stunted, or he has never been taught really to observe and think.

There is no call for me to suggest a remedy; it suggests itself. The prescription, diluted to be sure and often mixed with neutralizing agents, has been printed here and in every other educational journal of this decade. Simplify the curriculum, and simplify it by taking out the least useful studies. Cut down the amount of time spent on others to half and relegate the training of the specialist to the university and the professional school. Do not spend a third or a fifth of the pupil's youth upon Latin and Greek simply because they are hard, nor give these subjects—useless in the majority of cases except for the advantages which simple difficulty implies—a monopoly of your attention and interest. Much of modern language work also is purely ornamental and can be spared. The teaching of

mere children French *memoriter* or by analytical methods is a fashionable educational fad without foundation in reason or experience. Above all, concentrate attention on thoroughness and correctness of expression as the final and absolute test of the pupil's accomplishments, and not upon number of facts presumably attained, extent and variety of ground covered, or breadth of observation inferred from the scattered hints and unintelligible utterances of the class room and the examination paper. It is a law almost without exception that information which halts and stammers upon the tongue, or conceals itself in a tangle of barbaric verbiage is worthless. In every subject teach English first, last, and always. Make the strength of the vehicle commensurate with the weight of the burden it must carry. Language is fundamental; it is habit; it is character; it gives form and color to everything it handles. Make it independent of all prescribed courses of school or college. The mission of secondary education in English instruction is higher than the standard set by the colleges. To them we should look for suggestions, but not for criterions. We must heed the clamorings of the multitude to whom poverty or choice closes the doors of the higher institutions. It may be that the favored few can afford to slight English; they have before them a career of study in the liberal arts which may partly atone for early neglect. But the multitude, the home-making, home-supporting masses, must not be turned out from the lower schools to carry through life an ignorance of their mother tongue, which virtually closes to them the doors of its vast treasure houses; to inflict on the public inaccuracies in speech and composition unpardonable in the veriest tyro; and to inoculate the infant prattle of their children with vernacular tendencies which years of training can hardly overcome.

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